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ABSTRACT

Although the general thrust of recent education reports and studies--to strengthen the academic quality of secondary education--has been salutary, efforts fall short of giving clear direction for school improvement in a number of areas particularly important to urban school superintendents. The reports fail to recognize the unique context of urban education and, in general, tend to remove education from its social context. Surprisingly, in a country where over a quarter of all students are from ethnic minorities, the current reports are nearly silent on the special needs of these students. The recommendations for reform need to address school issues with a clearer understanding of their urban context in at least the nine following areas: educational goals; academic achievement and diversity; student tracking and promotion; resources and planning; support services; curriculum and instruction; language instruction; vocational education; and technology. (The remainder of the paper addresses these issues and offers suggestions for improvement in each area.) (KH)

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TOWARDS EXCELLENCE: AN URBAN RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL REFORM

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The abundance of recent foundation and government commission reports and academic research studies is one healthy sign of the great resurgence of interest in American public education. These documents all make similar recommendations for how schools should be reformed. They call for strengthening secondary education and stress the need for higher, more uniform standards and a richer, college preparatory, academic "core" curriculum for all students; they advocate severe curtailing of "soft," nonacademic subjects and services. Common to both the reports and studies are recommendations for longer school days and years and more homework as means to ensure higher achievement. Having teachers better educated in their disciplines and principals more involved with instructional leadership is urged, as are more extensive staff development and a more attractive and competitive system of salaries, promotions, merits and rewards.

The problems of student achievement that are at the root of the concern expressed in these reports have long troubled educational leaders. Beginning in the mid 1970s, concomitant with the emergence of a literature on effective schooling, most large school districts around the country recommended specific changes to improve schools and raise achievement. That such changes were already bearing fruit for many districts when the reports and studies were set in motion is evident in such simple measures as the rise in national achievement test scores which began in 1980. In fact, most of the commissions and academic researchers acknowledge that a "turn around" has already begun. Some draw specific recommendations from districts that have created "effective schools" or "educational excellence."

Because of their confluence with reforms now underway, these reports have been particularly welcomed by local school systems as well as state educational agencies for the support they give to education and the public interest they stimulate. They have also given new urgency to intellectual discussion among educators in a wide variety of contexts.

This paper is the outcome of one group's attempts to assess the reports' recommendations. The Urban Superintendents Network, sponsored by the National Institute of Education, commissioned a Study Group and considered the implications of the reports and studies for the specific problems and potentials of urban schools and students. In preparing our responses to the documents, we have examined the recommendations from several perspectives: as citizens who want to improve schools

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and raise student achievement, as school personnel who every day must make practical decisions about how to allocate human and financial resources, and as educators who have been entrusted with the responsibility for managing the instruction of a highly diverse student body within the distinctive environment of urban schooling. In our complicated mix of roles and responsibilities, we must consider how the reports and studies have helped education, or will begin to do so, and how they have not.

First and fundamental to our perception of these reports is that they fail to recognize the unique context of urban education. Despite the fact that school districts in cities of over 250,000 educate some twenty percent of all our nation's children, including over a third of our country's minority students, a quarter of all low income youngsters, and a third of the nation's limited English proficient youth, the reports do not isolate urban, minority, low income or non-English-speaking students for special attention. In fact, the reports not only ignore the particularities of urban schooling, but they tend to remove education from its social context in general. Surprisingly, in a country where over a quarter of *all* students are ethnic minorities, the current reports are nearly silent on their special needs.

In at least nine areas, we believe that the recommendations for reform need to address school issues with a clearer understanding of their urban context.

Goals

The new reform commission reports and academic studies generally agree that the purposes of education have become too diffuse. All would make literacy the top priority. Personal growth skills, work skills, and social and civic skills would become prevailing but secondary goals. Vocational education and the wide variety of elective and support services offered by urban schools would all be either curtailed or altogether eliminated.

As urban superintendents, we join in the goal of improving academic achievement for all students and creating a literate and intellectually creative American public. The question for us, however, is how will this be best achieved? Despite the press for a narrower, solely academic vision of schooling, it is our view that urban schools will have to continue to serve a broader social role, especially for some students. As educators, we may lament that other institutions such as the family, community, and church can no longer fulfill all of their customary functions. But even within these institutions themselves, many have come to expect particular assistance from the schools. If the schools now move out of those areas of support, who will provide? Many courses and support services which, the reports imply, diffuse the schools' purpose are in fact necessary for creating a literate, work-prepared urban student population. Guidance counseling and social work, school lunches and other nutritional programs, immunizations, racial integration projects, parent and community liasion, and family life education, among others, are crucial components of an environment conducive to meeting the long-term academic needs of many urban school children. These services and programs indirectly, but sharply, affect academic achievement.

Academic Achievement and Diversity

In their wish to raise achievement nationally, the reports and studies propose uniform standards and a common, academically strengthened curriculum for all public school students. Most states have rapidly pursued this reform by raising graduation requirements for both college-bound and noncollege-bound students. Requirements for foreign language, mathematics, science, and other "core curricular" subjects, on the one hand, and vocational education, on the other have all undergone close scrutiny at both the state and local levels. In general, there has been a stiffening of academic requirements, particularly for those students planning to attend college, while vocational education requirements have been rolled back.

As urban superintendents, we note that although the reports argue for "the twin goals of equity and quality" (*A Nation at Risk*), and assert that "the skills once possessed by only a few must now be held by many" (the Twentieth Century Fund), they offer little direction for how to teach the diverse populations that fill the nation's urban schools. The legislative responses of the states also have shown no particular sensitivity to the problem of urban education. Nearly 20 percent of all urban sophomores drop out before graduation, and the percentage is far higher among students who perform poorly academically. Without supplemental programs in the basic skills, special learner-sensitive teaching devices, and other resources and services, a uniform, preparatory, academic curriculum will either increase the existing high rate of failure and dropout among academically disadvantaged students or will result in the relabeling of diplomas and cosmetic modifications of course content which only give an illusion of academic improvement.

We also ask who shall be held accountable for student academic improvement or failure. Although the current spate of reports uniformly advocates increased teacher salaries, better career ladders, and a more responsive system of honors, merits and rewards for teaching staff, they are silent on the possible relationship between teachers' success and their students' progress.

As superintendents dedicated to improving urban student academic performance, we believe that new forms of accountability must be discovered and instituted, and that the career advancement of school professionals — teachers, principals, and superintendents — must be related to the academic progress of our students.

Student Tracking and Promotion

"The best education for the best is the best education for all," states *The Paideia Proposal* and other reports, though not as eloquent on the point, are equally opposed to the tracking of students into academically differentiated streams. Yet the National Commission on Excellence in Education expresses a common view when it suggests, "Student groupings and promotion should be based on achievement and instructional needs, not just age."

Tracking does often lead to racial and class educational inequities. Who more than urban educators knows this to be so! Moreover, social promotions, though they create an illusion that all is well and equitable, are an enormous disservice to both students and the society at large. The reform reports are rhetorically correct in taking strong stands against these distortions of the educational process. The problem we face is in going beyond rhetoric to the very difficult decisions of educational management when the population is highly diverse and pupil skills and competencies vary. If student groupings are "based on achievement," this in effect creates the beginnings of tracking. But if a uniform core curriculum is established where "the best for the best is the best for all," a large number of students will be doomed to failure unless additional sup-

ports are provided. Even if special classes are held outside the school day or in summer, they will, in effect, lead to some form of grouping. The authors of the current reports may believe that it is not their role to worry about management issues, but we, as urban superintendents, are left with the contradictions embedded in their proposals, and with the very concrete tasks of creating school programs that avoid the historical problems of both tracking and student dropout and failure.

Resources and Planning

The recent commission reports and academic studies have created an environment of interest, even enthusiasm, for reform, which is the first and most important step in any process of revitalization. The tenor of their recommendations — raised expectations and standards for secondary schooling — will be achieved, in part, through attitudinal shifts which are independent of financial or other resources.

On the other side, the reform documents suggest a number of school improvement mechanisms which will either cost districts additional money or necessitate a redirection of resources. The national polls indicate that more communities are now willing to pay for school improvement. It is understandable that the authors of the reports do not address specific local resource issues; economic difficulties should not be used to vitiate the power of the reform recommendations. But the omission of any discussion concerning price tags, possible balancing of priorities, or sources of funding[1] tends to limit the potential effectiveness of the recommendations.

As urban superintendents, we are concerned about the adverse effects of some recent urban school reforms that are based on rapid efforts to raise standards in the context of "resource blind planning." School districts usually first attempt the most visible, simplest reforms. However, rapid changes that make news headlines and appear beneficial at first, but which are not backed by sufficient resources and adequate planning, may well hide trouble that will appear later. In one large city system, for instance, an increase in the number of classes from five to seven a day, without the necessary budget for additional teachers, has resulted in oversized classes of more than 35 students. It is important that, in our enthusiasm for reform, we not take on so much so soon that nothing can be very well completed.

Support Services

There is little stated awareness in the commission reports and research studies of the many social problems — desegregation mandates, new non-English-speaking immigrants, family mobility and dissolution, teenage pregnancy, the effects of poverty — that urban schools face. Perhaps most telling is the view common to a number of the reports that, in taking on services to meet these social needs, the public schools have lost their sense of direction.

As urban superintendents, we believe that support services remain a critical factor in both urban school holding power and academic achievement. As the research suggests, those students who succeed against pessimistic predictions do so because they have had a large number of school-based or school-related social services available to them. Thus, to argue that the school has lost its central dedication to academic achievement by taking on a variety of social roles is to misunderstand how urban students get educated.

Curriculum and Instruction

Aimed at a policy level, the commission reports and academic studies have been most effective in generating state level reform. Such changes have altered curriculum and instruction requirements for both subjects and units of time. The reforms say little, however, about what is to take place during the hours, days, or years of study of a particular subject, about the textbooks and materials to be used, or about such process issues as teaching styles and classroom interactions best suited to different subjects and a diversity of students.[2]

As urban superintendents, we clearly see raising standards and increasing requirements as an important step. However, educators must not be deluded into believing that curriculum and instruction are improved merely by expanding time units either spent in school or doing homework. Although some national attention has begun to be devoted to textbook revision, enormous questions remain concerning teaching, technology delivery, classroom management, and the interaction of teaching and learning styles for different subjects and students. Given the diversity of an urban student body and the difficulties of maintaining a qualified teaching staff, a more clear conceptualization of these issues is particularly important.

As we increasingly turn our attention and resources to improving curriculum and instruction through staff development, we must be careful that the quality of staff services is sound. Here again the commission reports offer little guidance, as they limit their recommendations to delivery issues such as hours, compensation, and location. Staff development programs should use the best theories of adult learning in training teachers; they also should transmit understanding of teacher behaviors that have the greatest promise for stimulating children's learning. This, more than the mechanics of delivering staff development services, should be our major concern.

Language Instruction

Most of the reports make no mention of students whose dominant language is not English. Yet these students constitute a third of the urban student body. Assuming a population fluent in English, the reports recommend that all secondary students master advanced English language skills, and that college bound students take two or three years of a foreign language. Only one report, that of the Twentieth Century Fund, singles out the special problems of non-English-speaking students: it argues that Federal funds now being used for bilingual education be transferred to programs to teach these students how to speak, read, and write English.

As urban superintendents, we strongly affirm the importance of making available special instruction for students whose first language is not English — whether the method used is bilingual education, English as a Second Language, or another approach. Not only must non-English speakers

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[1] An exception is the National Science Foundation's *Educating Americans for the 21st Century*, which suggests implementation vehicles and forecasts costs for its recommendations.

[2] Two exceptions to this generalization should be mentioned: Adler's *Paideia Proposal*, which discusses teaching styles appropriate to various subject types — not students; and Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*, which suggests basic overhauling of the teacher-dominated, drill and response classroom characteristic of high school education.

become fluent in English, but they must be helped to keep up with their agemates in other subjects while they are learning the new language.

Equally important, urban students, possessed of a great variety of native languages, offer a valuable cultural resource to the nation. These students should not be forced to take French or German as their second language, while allowing their native language capabilities to fade from disuse.

Vocational Education

"Training for particular jobs is not the education of free men and women," states *The Paideia Proposal*. Although other reports take a more cautious stance, two common criticisms are leveled at vocational education: that it has constituted a track and so has been discriminatory (the Carnegie Commission; Goodlad), and that specific training too often either leads to deadend jobs or quickly becomes anachronistic (Business Higher Education Forum). The proposed increased academic requirements for graduation would severely limit students' ability to take vocational education courses; this has already happened in some states.

As urban superintendents, we note that though there are differences in the quality and intensity of vocational education programs around the country, many have increased their academic components and raised the standards of the vocational course offerings themselves. In a number of urban school districts vocational education is now an attractive, prestigious option at the secondary level — an option that, among high risk students, is largely responsible for dropout prevention. At the same time, our country needs well-prepared vocational graduates just as much as it needs physicists, doctors or lawyers.

We believe, therefore, that before vocational educational programs are discontinued or even severely curtailed, extensive analysis must be made of their serviceability both to the society and to students. At present, we strongly support vocational education programs, given two provisos: first, that no program conflict with the highest priority of giving all youth the basic academic skills; and second, that vocational education be immediately viable in relation to job opportunities in the community and beyond.

Technology

Most of the reports and studies stress the importance of using the newest technology for instruction, particularly through access to computers.

As urban superintendents, we recognize the enormous emerging force of technology in shaping our society and changing the nature of work. Our standing concern in this area is more completely expressed in the policy analysis paper prepared by our technology study group last spring. However, three issues particularly concern us here: First, the new technology must not separate further children of the poor from those in more affluent circumstances. Second, computer technology must become more learner-sensitive. This is particularly important for students with learning difficulties who, in fact, tend to be among the most frequent users of computers for instructional purposes. Computerized instruction should not be simply another more expensive way of leaving disadvantaged students free to fail. Third, educators must guide the computer industry toward developing educational programs that are appropriate to instructional goals, especially those for diverse urban populations.

Summary

The recent commission reports and academic studies have stimulated reform in education and given support to reforms already underway. The general thrust of these reports, to strengthen the academic quality of secondary education, has been salutary. However, they fall short of giving clear direction for school improvement in a number of areas particularly important to us as urban superintendents. Thus we must make a number of recommendations of our own:

- Academic achievement is a top priority for urban schools. Commitment to achievement should be continued and strengthened.
- No planning for raised academic achievement should take place without a full and serious evaluation of both the financial and human resources available and the range of programs necessary to create academic and other learning for all students. Short term, news-headline goals must not be achieved at the expense of long-range planning.
- Higher academic standards and graduation requirements must be accompanied by appropriate support services, as well as supplemental enrichment courses, for those students who need them.
- Special attention must be given to high risk students to prevent both social promotions and dropping out.
- Raising academic standards must not be left to issues of form, such as numbers of hours, days or years on a particular subject. Greater focus must be given to content and process. Research must be conducted on the best textbooks, teaching methods, and other curricular issues for the varieties of urban students.
- All non-English proficient students must be given a chance to become fluent in English at the same time as they keep up with their agemates in content area course work. The variety of languages available as a national resource must not be allowed to fade through disuse.
- The serviceability of vocational education for both students and society needs further study. In the meantime, vocational education should be continued as long as it does not conflict with the highest priority of giving all youth basic academic skills, and as long as the specific program is related to job opportunities in the community and beyond.
- As computers become a more prevalent part of instruction, educators must assume a leadership role to ensure that this new technology does not further separate the have's from the have-not's and that it is sensitive to the specific learning needs of diverse urban populations.
- New forms of accountability must begin to relate career advancement, salaries and rewards of school professionals — teachers, principals, and superintendents — to the academic progress of students.
- The content of staff development programs must be strong. These programs should be based on a philosophical approach that welds theories of how adult teachers best learn with theories of teaching behaviors which facilitate children's learning.

Finally, as urban superintendents, our faith in our schools is strengthened by the interest and attention this reform literature has evoked. We are committed to accepting the best recommendations as a source of renewed energy and dedication for those who serve our schools as teachers, administrators, and board members.

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The Urban Superintendents Network

Established in 1979 by the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Urban Superintendents Network is a representative group of chief school administrators from major cities throughout the nation. Participating superintendents meet several times a year, together with NIE staff members, researchers, and other educational practitioners, to consider substantive issues and policies which are particularly relevant to urban education. Study groups are formed to address certain concerns in greater depth; currently there are study groups working on staff development and on the introduction of technology to urban schools. Through such activities, urban superintendents are able to exchange information, benefit from each other's experiences, and explore urban perspectives on major educational issues.

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